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Statement on the ratification process and democracy at NUGW-UE.

Alejandro Abisambra

Hi everyone,

My name is Alejandro Abisambra and I am one of the six Bargaining Committee members that voted against a formal “yes” recommendation for the tentative contract. Some members have asked for more information on why the different BC members voted in the way they did. I think this is an important and reasonable ask, so I want to share today why I think voting No on this tentative agreement is the best course of action. However, I also want to clarify that I am not a part of the organized “vote No campaign” that has emerged, and I have not spoken publicly about these issues until today. The opinions I share today are my own, and I do not intend to speak for any other bargaining committee or union members.

I also want to share my impressions on how the bargaining and ratification processes have unfolded. I have serious concerns about patterns of conduct that have emerged in the past months that lead me to question the democratic character of the union under the current leadership. I will elaborate on these at the end of the text. I have tried to sound alarms and voice these concerns in a less public way in the past. At this point, I feel that all other avenues have been closed and exhausted, and I must speak up.

Reasons to reject the tentative agreement:

There are two main reasons why I think it is important to reject the current tentative agreement. First, because of the way the bargaining process is structured, I think it is a sub-optimal strategy for us, as a union, to take this offer. Since day 1 of bargaining, the University has always known that bargaining would reach a point where a proposal would be voted on by membership. They have also known, from the beginning, that if the proposal is rejected the consequence would be to come back to the negotiating table to look for alternative offers. They know this because it is standard practice across the U.S. in employer-union negotiations.

Under this framework, it is in the University’s best interest to offer us at this stage what they consider to be the bare minimum to secure 50%+1 of the votes in ratification. In doing so, not only do they obtain financial savings, but they may also be able to generate divided opinions in the union: an outcome they love. Throughout our escalation and organization up to this point, we have shaped the University’s beliefs about what this “bare minimum” is. They have judged that the minimum we would take is a 45k stipend, with no dependent care coverage, and insufficient financial resources for the international students’ fund.

To be sure, this is not a gift from the University. It is the result of our escalation and organizing. Without it, they may have thought that the “bare minimum” for a ratification vote was 38k, which

was their insulting opening offer in negotiations. Organizing and escalating works. But I think we can do more organizing and more escalating through a No vote, and secure better terms. I think we folded too early in the negotiations and ended up with a tentative agreement that is certainly better than the current status quo, but still significantly below the packages of other universities that Northwestern considers to be their peers (e.g.: Brown, Yale, MIT, Harvard, among others). They are playing us, and I don't think that we should fall for it.

The second reason to vote No and go back to the negotiations is that I think we gave up too much, too fast, and left behind some of our members. I hope that we can correct this. To do this, our current best, and only, option to get better terms for this contract is to vote No and return to the table. I want to outline my perception of the way in which the last stretch of bargaining evolved, since February 1st, as I think it helps to explain my reasoning and why I hope to be able to get back to the table through a No vote.

After the February 1st bargaining session, where the BC made the difficult decision of conceding dependent health coverage, the narrative that emerged was something like: we lost one battle today, but in doing so we have positioned ourselves to come back to the table, bargain very hard, and get big, impressive, gains on stipends and international student support in subsequent sessions. The parents and caregiver organizers, however, did not see it that way. Following our bylaws and absolutely within their rights, they began organizing a referendum petition around this issue that quickly gathered the required support to move forward per the unions democratically-ratified rules. Even though I do not support the entirety of the content of the proposed referendum, I was glad to see a very active membership that democratically mobilized around the decisions of the union's leadership to make their voices heard.

However, in the decision-making spaces that I witnessed, the reaction towards the referendum from most of union leadership was quite hostile. Around that same period of time, in leadership spaces the narrative about bargaining quickly began to change. We moved from "we are going to come back hard" to a very rushed strategy where the main -and almost only- concern was to get a tentative agreement as soon as possible. A sense of immediate urgency that was not entirely present on February 1st suddenly became imperative. We intensified our strike pledge efforts to seek leverage to get a last, best, and final offer on February 21st. Whenever there were tensions around strategies that could privilege a stronger contract, but at the cost of not getting a final offer on February 21st, I feel that the choice was almost invariably to pick speed and expediency over other proposals to admin. More specifically, proposals to attack the dependent care question from a different angle, which sought to avoid any concerns of regressive bargaining, were flat out rejected by union leadership without any serious consideration.

In doing so, we came into the Feb 21st open bargaining session with the primary goal of getting a final offer. I think an artificial pressure of "its now or never" was created, and this ultimately led

us to accept a fund for international students that is beautiful on paper (in terms of what it covers) but absolutely insufficient in terms of the money inside that fund. It's a mirage. This was in addition to the concession we had already made on Feb 1st with regards to dependent care. In my opinion, we did not come back to bargain as hard as we could have. Instead, we rushed and privileged speed and expedience, followed by a positive recommendation, which I think was a mistake.

Again, the tentative agreement that we have today is better than our current status quo, and we need to recognize the progress that we have made through our organizing. But the proposal still falls short of what other peer institutions have gained, with perhaps the exception of U Chicago who followed our steps to secure the exact same stipends that we got, just a couple of weeks after us. But even U Chicago was able to secure a partial (25%) subsidy for dependent care healthcare coverage.

Throughout the bargaining process, in different instances there have been sectors of membership that have moved us to make higher and bolder proposals at the bargaining table. In hindsight, I am glad that it happened this way, since I believe it was these bolder proposals that made it possible to have the tentative contract that we have today. Today, again, there are sectors of membership that are encouraging us to be bold, to ask for more, and to come back to the bargaining table to fight for a better contract. I hope that we heed their call.

Concerns about the democratic character of the union under current leadership

I also want to share some concerns with respect to actions taken by the union leadership that, in my opinion, put in jeopardy the democratic character of the union. I think it is important to speak up against these tendencies and course correct. In the last few months, I have witnessed an enormous disregard for the rules and procedures established in the democratically-ratified bylaws of the union, attitudes that are hostile to dissenting positions, democratic discussion, and in some cases, endorse non-transparent approaches in decision-making. There has been a consistent pattern of actions and positions from leadership, most notably in private decision-making spaces, in which dissent from leadership's decisions has been equated to "language used by the bosses" and likened to acts against the union itself. I think these approaches to dissent and opposition are deeply undemocratic and risk degenerating into an authoritarian and divided union. Tagging opposing opinions as disloyal or as puppets is one of the first steps for the closure of democratic spaces.

There are 3 sets of events that illustrate these trends, but this is not an exhaustive list. First, leadership's disregard of the bylaws and repetitive stalling with respect to the dependent care referendum and the election of officers whose terms expired on March 2nd. For a very long time, until February 2024, the union's leadership respected the bylaws as our rulebook, invoked them for legitimacy in arguments, and used them as a guiding compass for internal union matters.

This lasted until some sectors of membership invoked the bylaws to advocate for issues that were not in agreement with the leaderships' official positions. For example, the referendum on dependent care, or the need for new elections of co-chairs and BC members due to the expiration of their terms in office.

Suddenly, in decision-making spaces such as the OC or the BC, the union's leadership and, on some occasions the union staff, began arguing that the bylaws were non-binding, mere general orientations, and non-enforceable. They argued that many locals did not have bylaws before a first contract, and therefore we shouldn't take ours too seriously.

I was appalled. It was very convenient that this radical change of stance came right when following the rules was not conducive to the leadership's agenda. Let me be clear: even if the bylaws were to be non-enforceable, there was nothing in the UE constitution that prevented leadership from following the NUGW bylaws. On these matters, the substantive content of the bylaws with respect to election terms or referendum processes does not violate the UE constitution and therefore there was nothing preventing leadership from following the NUGW bylaws. They did so in the past without concerns, until February 2024, when the bylaws became inconvenient to their goals.

A second example of concerning undemocratic practices is related to the treatment of dissent and the actions of the majority of the BC after the bargaining session of February 21st. In the days after this session, the internal discussion spaces/channels that the BC has been using up to this point stopped being regularly used, in an attempt to exclude dissenting members of the committee from the discussions and decision-making processes. Instead of this, a "shadow BC" formed, with alternate discussion spaces, that notably do not include several dissenting members. Purposefully excluding some BC members, preventing them from knowing what the BC is discussing is deeply troubling and, in my opinion, a trait of authoritarianism. There are other examples and instances, of course, but I think this is an adequate illustration of my concerns.

Finally, a third example is the way in which this ratification vote process has been conducted by leadership. I understand that the BC and the NUGW leadership are in favor of the tentative agreement and issued a recommendation, the same way that a government may seek re-election or advocate for their policies in a campaign. However, I think that for the purposes of this campaign the NUGW leadership abused their control of communication resources (social media accounts, mailing lists, etc.) to unduly privilege the diffusion of their position and impose unfair restrictions on dissenting views.¹ NUGW leadership has gone so far as to send emails to external people in the labor movement to dissuade them (on what I judge to be hostile terms)

¹ For a public example of this, check the conversation in the comms channel between several people asking to be able to share materials related to the Vote No campaign and the responses from Comms leadership.

from participating in events organized by the Vote No campaign. I understand the intent of these invitations was to get these outside voices to share on their organizing experiences in other places.

To me, the double standard here is alarming. NUGW leadership has invited outside speakers from the labor movement to several of the GMMs for that very same purpose: sharing organizing experiences and building solidarity. When leadership does it, when they invite the guests that fit their messaging, then it is all fine. But when members in a different campaign organize an event and do the same thing, then leadership sends emails to the invited guests to dissuade them from participating.

These non-democratic patterns of action are alarming to me. I exhort the NUGW leadership to reconsider their actions and adjust course. I hope that this statement contributes to create a more open discussion around these issues and serves as an opportunity to critically re-examine the ways in which recent bargaining and ratification processes have been handled. Regardless of the outcome of the ratification vote, NUGW-UE has a long path and a future full of opportunities to improve the working conditions of workers. But to do so successfully, I think we must all ensure that these sorts of behaviors do not happen ever again.

In solidarity, and hoping for a strong, thriving, and democratic union,

Alejandro